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Event: Lt Colonel Marc Sasseville, 121st Fighter Squadron Commander, Air National Guard

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Background

[FOUO] Lt Col Marc Sasseville went to the Air Force Academy; flew F-16s; spent 14 years in active service; flew for Delta Airlines for a year; and then he went full-time as a reservist at Andrews for the 121st Fighter Squadron as an operations officer. As Squadron Commander, he oversaw many of the activities of the other pilots assigned to the 121st.

On 9-11

[FOUO] Sasseville was in the scheduling meeting the morning of 9-11. It was there that he learned the first plane flew into the World Trade Center. There was no indication of terrorism yet. By the second one, "everyone knew it was a coordinated event" said Sasseville. Everyone was thinking defensively within a couple of minutes.

[FOUO] Many of the pilots (reservists) had returned to their regular jobs with the airlines and others were on leave due to the rigorous training they had just completed – Red Flag. The schedule for that Monday and Tuesday was flying sorties. Three of the six pilots available that morning were flying over North Carolina. There were 8-10 planes available. They were gassed up and eventually were used in response to the attacks.

[8] Sasseville turned on his engine for his first flight up just as he heard a plane was coming up the river over the frequency. He was loaded with training rounds. He knew that Hutchinson has no specific rules of engagement. Sasseville took off with what he called "ops plan ROE." He does not remember receiving more guidance from Wherley at the soft desk before getting in his jet. It was uncomfortable to be up there without ROE. Sasseville was airborne for 20 minutes when Wherley passed on intercept

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authority. There was no ROE given at that time. "Weapons free" was used later in the day. It was the faxed ROE he finally saw later in the afternoon that confirmed shoot-down authority for Sasseville.

[FOUO] According to Sasseville, the repeat warning broadcast over the frequency "entering Class B airspace - all aircraft will be shot down" was an Air National Guard message; not an ATIS message (as reported earlier by Steve Marra, ATC at Andrews Tower).

[FOUO] Commission staff played Hutchinson and Sasseville's head's up displays on the VCR during the interview to clarify a few points of interest. There is a military desk at Washington Center to get some data on what the threat looks like. This is before launching the fighters. Sasseville tells the SOC (Thompson) to "break out the A-9s, and to notify General Wherley." He was Wing Commander with the launch authority.

The CAP

[FOUO] Sass was the first to CAP DC that day. He encountered Quit 25 on the radio and assumes they were military aircraft, but he did not know at that time who they were or that they were Langley fighters. He acknowledged to the Commission that it was a "potentially dangerous situation." Sasseville recalled that Razin' (Wild 01) knew that Langley fighters were up before he did.

[FOUO] Razin' and Rassmussen (Wild 01 and 02) joined the cap with aim-9 missiles. Sasseville said that Razin has a tendency to talk a lot on the frequency when he is flying.

[FOUO] With Heather Penny (CAP 02), Wild 01 and 02 and the Langley fighters (Quit 25), Sasseville set up the cap. He wanted all four quadrants of the city covered. He did not know at the time from which direction a plane might be coming. The guardsmen capped at 11,000 ft and talked to Washington Approach while the Langley fighters stayed high to communicate with NORAD/NEADS and Washington Tower. He did not know he was looking for UAL 93; although he was anticipating a passenger jet. He suspected it would come from the northwest because the Pentagon, which was already hit, is northwesterly of Andrews AFB. The Aviation Weekly piece on Sasseville inaccurately reported that Sasseville knew he was looking for UAL 93.

[FOUO] Sasseville established the "bullseye" as National Airport. As a mission commander, he was practiced in improvisational situations, whereas the NORAD guys followed directions (according to Sasseville).

[FOUO] Once Langley fighters realized the DC guard had better situational awareness than they did, they took orders well from Sasseville.

Communications Problems

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[FOUO] There were communications problems despite the fact the CAP was set up effectively and in short order. ATC thought Quit 26 was NORDO when he was coming down on the CAP, but the fighter pilot was in fact on another frequency talking to Huntress. Tactical communications ultimately were facilitated by the tanker. The guardsmen made attempts to coordinate with Langley fighters through datalink but compatibility did not exist.

AF1 Threats

[FOUO] He escorted AF1 on its left wing in to Andrews later in the day on 9-11. He visually inspected it and it was fine. Heather Penny, the other fighter pilot was ten miles out front. Langley pilots were to the right of the plane. He was not aware of any threats to the plane that day. There was a lear jet vectored on AF1 but it was nothing.

Air National Guard and NORAD/ NEADS structure

[FOUO] He remembers that there was some confusion as to where the Air National Guard fit into the NORAD and NEADS (Northeast Air Defense Sector) structure. On that day, he did not know what NEADS was; NORAD, he knew, "had the mountain" in Colorado. The structure of the air defense "crowd," as Sasseville called them, (NORAD/ NEADS) had completely different communications, training, rules, and equipment on their jets than the Air National Guard. There was no continuity between the two operational structures; the Guard was not part of that chain. Sasseville said, "We didn't understand the Air Defense world." He called them "Coneheads." [Note: Sasseville said that staff had probably heard the term "Coneheads." General Wherley used it in his interview with Commission Staff. That implies that Sasseville compared notes with Wherley prior to this interview.]

The Mission of the DC Air National Guard

[FOUO] Sasseville said the Guard supported the Air Force structure. Every fifteen months they were deployed. All ROE they received were tailored to individual warfighting missions. With that in mind, on 9-11, the DC Air National Guard saw defense of the Capitol as its warfighting mission, yet as an expeditionary force they never trained for it. They had 4-5 active-duty fighter units at that time. And furthermore, if they had tried to develop training programs in defense of the capitol region, Sasseville felt that the Guard would have received "serious pushback" from the Department of Defense. As a result, there was no procedure, or training, for the defense of the capitol on 9-11.

[S] Today, the Guard still "caps the Capitol irregularly, but not randomly." Alert barns and the Command Post have been installed since 9-11 on Base. At all times, three planes and two pilots are on alert. NEADS alerts the Guard to scramble when necessary. At the same time, the Guard continues to operate abroad "dropping bombs on foreign countries." The Guard Bureau is trying to get the DC Air National Guard to maintain both operations "more cheaply," but without more planes and money Sasseville does not

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see how the tempo can be maintained indefinitely. "They want us to be Coneheads," Sasseville said with frustration. "The hybrid system in effect now can not sustain itself."

[FOUO] Lines of communication with other agencies such as NEADS and the White House JOC are imperfect. Sasseville believes that the position of the Guard on 9-11 was fortuitous because they were not a part of the NORAD chain of command. This made it possible for them to respond as quickly as they did that day. Sasseville believes that NORAD is still not responsive enough to counteract the "pop-up" threat. If a similar event happened today, Sasseville did not think the White House would necessarily call the Air National Guard. NORAD/NEADS would not encourage that.

[FOUO] Putting the Guard into the NORAD system, as First Air Force units, is going to slow down their response time in an emergency situation. Procedures are in place now that weren't there on 9-11. He doesn't know if the White House would feel better if they had someone on call such as the fighters of the DC Air National Guard. No one is working this issue, according to Sasseville. There is no forum for this discussion on the relationship between the 1st Air Force and the Air National Guard and defense of the capital region to take place. This is something specific to the Nation's capital. Sasseville feels it is a very important discussion to take place. Restructure of the air defense of America – if that means the 113th Wing will become a part of 1st Air Force – he thinks many members of the air guard like himself will be lost.

Terminology

[UNC] "Joker" is a warning that gas level is low; "Bingo" means "stop what you are doing" and land; "Mel Power" means to "put the pedal all the way down;" "Afterburner" means to open up and dump gas in the engine; and "buster" means "go as fast as you can."

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